

THE DANCER

Ficke, Arthur Davison, 1883-1945

They were godly people, all of them,
With whom I dined
In the cafe that night—
Substantial citizens
With their virtuous wives
And a stray daughter or two. . . .
And when I spoke my admiration of your dancing,—
You, the little half-clothed painted cabaret performer
Who was pirouetting before us,—
I received a curious answer.—
It was only as the absurd voicing
Of a preposterous fancy
That one of the virtuous wives said to me—
"Why don't you go over and dance with her yourself!"
Her voice stung me,—it was so sure
That to dance with you would be a shameful and unpleasant thing.
So I answered crossly— "For a nickel I would."
And one of the daughters,
Who doubtless suffered later for her evil act,
Handed me the nickel.

And that was how it came to be
That you and I
Before the gaping herd of my respectable fellow-townsmen
Forgot the world.
Light was the pressure of your hand
And your body was as answering to my touch
As is a little willow to the wind.
I could not see your painted face against my shoulder;
forgot that you were clad in veils to lure the lustful crowd;
The tawdry glitter of the hour faded and died
As you and I soared up
Upon the music.
O soul of a bird!
O cooling wind from the mountains of wild laurel!
O dreamer of a pattern of whirling stars
Down which we moved
In dizzy orbits!
Perfumes of Arabia were around us;
Tremulous melody heard by none other
Out of some distant garden poured in wild song.

And there were lights in the air;
And there were memories
Of forgotten Thracian hillsides,
And madness, and oblivion,
And a fierce white peace.

Then the dance ended. . . .
And you were once more a little painted harlot
In an ugly cafe
Before a vulgar audience.
So I led you back to your table
And thanked you conventionally,
And turned to go.— But a sudden impulse
Swept me.—
And in the sight of all the gaping respectabilities
I turned to you again
And kissed you
In recognition and farewell
To that winged spirit which you late had been.